# Information disorder in the Israel-Hamas war highlights shifts in the fight against online misinformation

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Swathes of US news-seekers have turned to social media influencers for information about the Israel-Hamas war, hoping to find voices of clarity and information they can trust in addition to or apart from traditional news outlets. But those searching for news on social media platforms will find a cruel battlefield of another kind.

A motley crew of news amateurs, grassroots commentators, and bad actors lead charges across an information combat zone that ISD analysts have found to include pro-terrorist content (https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/illegal-violent-terrorist-content-relating-to-hamas-israel-conflict-reaches-millions-on-x/) that is illegal and violent, violent graphic imagery (https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/violent-and-graphic-content-of-the-gaza-conflict-served-to-minors-accounts/) that's accessible to children, and state actors (https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/capitalising-on-crisis-russia-china-and-iran-use-x-to-exploit-israel-hamas-information-chaos/) that exploit the crisis for ulterior agendas. Rhetoric conveying antisemitic (https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/rise-in-antisemitism-on-both-mainstream-and-fringe-social-media-platforms-following-hamas-terrorist-attack/) and anti-Muslim (https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/use-of-words-phrases-and-hashtags-associated-with-anti-muslim-mobilisation-surges-amid-israel-gaza-conflict/) attitudes has snowballed on platforms, mirroring surges in offline hate.

For some political audiences, the influencers and amateur aggregators battling online can all but replace traditional news media, especially when gaps in trust and information exist. Flooded by decontextualized snippets of information from all directions plagued by narrative collapse (https://theconvivialsociety.substack.com/p/narrative-collapse), audiences seek those who can help them rationalize the chaos.

Not all influencers share pure intentions, and all operate in problematic environments where efforts to

curtail misinformation are inadequate, if meaningful at all. Many of the highest-profile figures in these spaces are engaged in commentary rather than newsgathering and measure success differently than journalists. And lacking the resources and training available to traditional newsrooms, even well-meaning influencers are vulnerable to mistakes and manipulation by nefarious operators.

This is not to say that all influencers are worthy of disproportionate scrutiny simply because they fail to fill the imperfect molds of traditional news media. In many respects, they illustrate how social media has democratized the news environment: a positive change that has empowered citizen journalists, enabling accountability on new fronts, and empowering previously marginalized voices.

But no change comes without consequences.

A recent analysis found that English-language news discourse about the Israel-Hamas war on X (formerly called Twitter) was dominated (https://www.cip.uw.edu/2023/10/20/new-elites-twitter-x-most-influential-accounts-hamas-israel/) not by traditional news outlets but rather by amateur aggregators and social media influencers—some of which have peddled inflammatory rhetoric and misleading information. Paid accounts on X, which receive artificial boosts (https://www.theverge.com/2022/12/23/23523845/twitter-blue-paying-priority-replies-conversations) in visibility from the platform, were responsible for nearly three-quarters (https://www.newsguardtech.com/misinformation-monitor/october-2023/) of viral misinformation about the war so far, according to one report.

The platform harbors a full-blown information disorder that functions like a disco ball, soaking the rhetorical dance floor with haphazard shimmers of questionable information. The chaos has even caused top newsrooms to stumble (https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/23/pageoneplus/editors-note-gaza-hospital-coverage.html). Despite readily apparent issues on X, capitalized on by influencers during the Israel-Hamas war, the platform has maintained relevance as a source of news among decisionmakers, meaning that the problems it displays reverberate beyond the platform and into other chambers of society.

Bad actors understand these kinds of changes in news consumption as opportunities to advance ulterior agendas. In recent years, some state actors have courted (https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/why-western-conspiracy-influencers-are-promoting-pro-kremlin-propaganda/) social media influencers who uncritically, or even knowingly, regurgitated messages of their influence campaigns to domestic audiences in a target country. Extremists have sought (https://www.vice.com/en/article/k7zx5a/neo-nazis-hijack-pro-palestine-protest-mike-enoch) to hijack Israel-Hamas war news to advance hateful ideologies in public discourse.

Understanding the power shift toward social media personalities in modern political news discourse and its resulting vulnerabilities is paramount to any effort to advance truthful shared realities or productive debates.

Though traditional news outlets still provide invaluable services to the public, research and actions related to these dynamics cannot be overly dependent on their work. The news industry is shrinking and dying (https://apnews.com/article/816b31f8571d4b759227e58c6252e99d) in the US and Americans are following less news (https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/10/24/americans-are-following-the-news-less-closely-than-they-used-to/) these days, overall, so countermeasures dependent on traditional media will be inherently more difficult to scale.

Similarly, endeavors that over-rely on the good faith of social media platforms are also likely to flounder. The companies running platforms have repeatedly shown difficulty (https://theintercept.com/2018/04/11/mark-zuckerberg-is-either-ignorant-deliberately-misleading-congress-or-both/) in explaining their practices and squeamishness (https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/24/technology/facebook-election-misinformation.html) to solutions that might interfere with profits. Employees who seek to fix these issues

are up against the power of the dollar, and in publicly traded companies they can expect to lose more often than they win.

Many social media platforms actually incentivize (https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/06/opinion/facebook-whistleblower-section-230.html) the root causes of information disorder, prioritizing inflammatory and reactive content that drives user engagement (and in turn, revenue) while neglecting (https://www.cnn.com/2021/10/22/business/january-6-insurrection-facebook-papers/index.html) larger issues. Platforms will claim (https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/elon-musks-twitter-files-trump-tweets-complicate-free-speech-rcna60322) they want to exist as marketplaces of ideas, but they are counterfeits that should be held accountable and liable for those profit-seeking decisions.

Romancing the past and attempting to tweak ineffective and problematic status quos will never be effective ways to shape our rapidly evolving future, and the Israel-Hamas war offers a chance to recalibrate before what will inevitably be a chaotic 2024 presidential election.

It's imperative the field of misinformation research seizes this opportunity for introspection and directs its focus toward the systems, not the symptoms, of information disorder.

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The EU AI Act: Insights from the world's first comprehensive AI law (https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/the-eu-ai-act-insights-from-the-worlds-first-comprehensive-ai-law/)

The EU AI Act (AIA) is the world's first comprehensive AI regulation that upholds democratic norms and human rights, ensures tech accountability, and prevents the spread of mis- and disinformation and its misuse by bad actors. However, some uncertainties around its implementation and enforcement remain.



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